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AUTHOR DeGuire, Michael R.
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ABSTRACT

A study surveyed teachers from 10 schools to determine tneir perceptions about the principal's actual and ideal role in the school's reading program. A 40-item questionnaire was organized for analysis in seven categories: (1) goal and program development, (2) program coordination and delivery, (3) supervision and evaluation, (4) staff development, (5) community relations, (6) principal knowledge, (7) and principal attitude. The principal interview form consisted of an indepth analysis of the same performance responsibilties. Findings showed that all teachers and principals agreed that ideally the principal should express a positive interest in and understanding of the school's reading program, provide fiscal support based on the needs of the entire staff, and conduct periodic schoolwide evaluation of student progress in reading. Schools in which reading achievement declined were for the most part administered by principals who were less involved in a leadership role for the school's program, less aware of the actions necessary to change the program, and more frustrated by limitations of time, personnel, budget, and district requirements. Schools that evidenced growth in reading achievement were noted for their intensive diagnosis and periodic assessment of students' reading, frequent communication among teachers about student needs in reading, cooperative working arrangements among most of the staff, and teachers' positive attitude about the principals' active support. (The 15 role performance statements are appended.) (HOD)

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THE ROLE OF THE ELEMENTARY PRINCIPAL IN INFLUENCING READING ACHIEVEMENT

Paper presented

at the Colorado Council of

the International Reading Association

February 6, 1981

Michael R. DeGuire, Ph.D.
Coordinator of Reading
Jefferson County Public Schools
Lakewood, Colorado

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INTRODUCTION

Achievement in the elementary school can be attributed to a number of interrelated factors: the child, the parent, the community environment, the school, the teacher, the materials, and the school administrator. The impact which each of these has on student success or failure is subject to different, sometimes conflicting, interpretations.

Some researchers have maintained that non-school related variables (i.e. student characteristics and community environment) explain approximately three-fourths of the variation in student achievement (California State Department of Education, 1977).

Concurrent research demonstrated, however, that all other things being equal--socio-economic status (SES), family background, and community influences--schools can and do make a difference in achievement (Brookover and others b, 1977).

None of the school-related variables operates in isolation. Oftentimes a school administrator functions as the catalyst for successful schoolwide programs. The principal's influence on student achievement has been postulated in terms of his role in establishing the school climate (Brookover and others a, 1976), through his relationship with the staff (Matthews and Brown, 1976), his policies on school improvement (Marcus and others, 1976), and his high level of leadership (Keeler and Andrews, 1963).

Madeline Hunter has stated, "In educational accomplishment, reading maintains the position as one of the most critical indicators of success" (Hunter, 1975). As in other academic areas, growth in reading is the result of a multitude of factors. Recognizably, the principal's actions and attitudes represent one component which may or may not be related to reading achievement. Exactly how a principal makes a difference in impacting reading achievement is unclear.

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

Teachers from ten selected schools in one large district were surveyed to determine the perceptions each group had about the principal's actual role and ideal role in the school's reading program.

Reading program effectiveness was measured by structuring the sample into two groups: schools with progressively "increasing" scores in reading achievement over the past three to four years (Group I), and schools with progressively "decreasing" scores in reading achievement over the past three to four years (Group II). All schools selected for the sample were administered by a principal whose longevity paralleled the reading test score pattern of growth or decline.

The survey procedure entailed the administration of a 40-item questionnaire listing recommended performance statements for the principal's actual role and ideal role in the school's reading program. These items were organized for analysis in seven categories: Administration: Goal and Program Development, Administration: Program Coordination and Delivery, Supervision and Evaluation, Staff Development, Community Relations, Principal Knowledge, and Principal Attitude. The principal interview form consisted of an in-depth analysis of the same performance responsibilities and attempted to determine administrative practives which contributed to a successful school reading program.

SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT AND THE PRINCIPAL

There is little question among researchers that some schools simply do a better job of educating their students(Rasmussen, 1976). Efforts to explain why differing student achievement levels exist across schools have centered on research of school-based factors which seem to contribute to achievement.

These factors may be classified into three groups: a) teacher characteristics, b) school and classroom climate, and c) administrator characteristics. The extent of teacher involvement with students(in fact teacher selection itself in many instances), and the responsibility for creating a productive school environment rest heavily with the school administrator. The principal's actions and characteristics play a prominent part in the school's success or failure to positively affect student learning.

Several research studies concluded that strong administrative leadership was highly correlated with student academic performance (Gross and Herriott,1965; Keeler and Andrews,1963; Edmonds, 1979; Weber, 1971). Both the Philadelphia Study and Austin's analysis

of 18 effective elementary schools highlighted the importance of the principals' observations and participation in the classroom during reading instruction(Kean and others,1979; Austin,1978).

The atmosphere that the principal created for the school was a critical factor highly recommended in both the literature citations and research practices(Blake, 1974; Berger and Bean, 1973; Department of Elementary School Principals, 1968; Howell, 1975). The principal who had "high expectations"(Austin,1978; State of New York, 1974; Weber, 1971) and established "reading as a priority"(Mayeske,1979) contributed significantly to student reading achievement.

MAIN FINDINGS

Significant statistical differences were found between increasing and decreasing school teachers on their perceptions of the principal's actual role and their perceptions of the difference between the principal's ideal role expectations and actual role performance in the school's reading program.

All teachers and principals agreed that ideally the principal should express a positive interest in and understanding of the school's reading program, provide fiscal support based on the needs of the entire staff, and conduct periodic school-wide evaluation of student progress. (See Appendix A for list of Highly Recommended Ideal Role Performance Statements.) The principals' time does not have to be expended on extensive supervisory activities, parent volunteer programs, or utilization of outside resources for staff development.

Schools in which reading achievement declined were for the most part administered by a principal who was less involved in a leadership role for the school's reading program, less aware of the actions necessary to change the school's reading program, and more frustrated by limitations of time, personnel, budget, and district requirements.

Schools which evidenced growth in reading achievement were noted for the following practices not reported by schools evidencing decline in reading achievement:

a) intensive diagnosis and periodic assessment of student reading strengths and weaknesses;

b) frequent communication among teachers about student needs in reading, including an awareness of a school-wide philosophy for teaching reading;

c) cooperative working arrangement among most of the staff including paraprofessionals;

d) teachers' positive attitude about the principals' active involvement and supportive interest in the school's reading program.

Relationship of Findings to Literature

The findings of this study corroborated earlier research which stressed the importance of principal leadership. Increasing school teachers commented on the leadership behavior and actions of their principals, responding with a higher percentage of positive descriptors on the principal's involvement in the school's reading program.

In Austin's study, teachers in unusually effective schools received high ratings from their principal(Austin, 1978). While many of the principals in this study praised their teachers for their efforts in teaching reading, four of the five increasing school principals actually excluded teachers in their identification of"weaknesses in the school's reading program."

Direct observation of classroom instruction in reading did not occur as frequently in the increasing schools as it had in some of the earlier studies(Kean and others, 1979; Austin, 1978). However, the increasing school principals emphasized a positive attitude with the staff, communicating trust and respect for their teachers. This finding confirmed the results of the School Effectiveness Study, where teachers from high-achieving schools reported a greater amount of support from the principal (California State Department of Education, 1977).

Principals in three increasing schools specifically discussed how their schools had allocated more time to reading instruction, a practice followed by one of the schools in Weber's study(Weber,1971). Three increasing school principals described a commitment to "basic skills", a feature of effective schools in the Detroit Model Cities Project(Edmonds, 1979).

The principals from increasing schools took ownership for their school's reading prorgam, as evidenced by their actions and attitudes about reading. Nearly twice the percentage of increasing school teachers compared to decreasing school teachers

responded that their principal "showed an interest in, appreciation of, and approval of effective teaching of reading" to a great degree.

Staff development participation seemed to make little difference in influencing reading achievement in the Philadelphia Study(Kean and others, 1979). Similar results were found in this study, in that staff development was not perceived as a high priority for the principal's actual role or ideal role in the school's reading program. Four of the increasing school principals discussed the policy of using their own personnel to work with teachers having difficulty teaching reading. Very few of the increasing school principals recommended utilizing outside resource personnel or providing teachers the opportunity to visit other schools' reading programs.

The Mayeske study reported that the five effective schools had "better resources" than other schools (Mayeske, 1979). The findings of this study suggest that "better resources" were not necessarily required. Several increasing and decreasing school principals were actively involved in procuring materials for their schools. Instead of having extensive materials, it was more important to have informed and clearly communicated procedures for using existing resources.

According to Kean and others(1979), the principal's background in reading was significant, and the assistant principal in the achieving school knew a lot about elementary instructional techniques in the State of New York Study(State of NewYork, 1974). In this study, theprincipal interviews indicated that increasing school principals expressed a more thorough understanding of the reading process and the elements necessary for building a successful reading program. Yet professional coursework had not been the primary vehicle to increase the principal's knowledge of reading. Several increasing school principals had learned more about reading by working closely with their best reading teachers.

As in most of the categories, teacher perceptions of the Principal's Knowledge of reading were significantly different in increasing and decreasing schools. Only 32% of the decreasing school teachers responded that their principal actually "understood the components of a balanced reading program" to a great degree, and 64% of the increasing school teachers responded similarly.

CONCLUSIONS

1. The principal who accepts the reading program as his/her major responsibility will more likely emphasize the importance of reading to the staff. In this way, the principal is communicating high but realistic expectations for student performance in reading, and showing teachers an interest in good teaching of reading. These actions significantly enhance the prospects of growth in reading achievement.

2. While provision of adequate materials to teach reading remains an important responsibility of the principal, he/she should ensure that clear and consistent procedures for using existing resources are established.

3. Teacher perceptions of the principal's attitude and knowledge about reading are more important than the actual time spent by the principal observing reading instruction. The principal who communicates a sense of trust and respect for the staff and an understanding of the elements of a balanced reading program will contribute to a positive environment for reading instructions.

4. The principal's involvement in working with the community related to the school's reading program should be to provide necessary test score information, foster frequent parent-teacher communication, and inform teachers of parent concerns in reading. Although parental support is helpful in increasing student progress in reading, it is not absolutely necessary. A meaningful and successful reading program can be provided for students from home backgrounds with minimal parental interest in academics.

5. The principal's involvement in improving teaching skills in the school's reading program will be enhanced by his/her efforts to create an atmosphere in which the staff will share strategies for teaching reading.

APPENDIX A

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED IDEAL ROLE PERFORMANCE STATEMENTS

Teachers and principals recorded at least 90% of their responses to the principal's ideal role (what should be) as either "to a moderate degree" or "to a great degree" for these 15 statements (listed in rank order beginning with highest percentage of responses):

1. Display a strong interest in improving the quality of the school's reading program.
2. Understand that a variety of materials are necessary to use in teaching reading.
3. Expect that a consistent and continuous reading program be offered for students from one grade level to the next.
4. Understand the components of a balanced reading program.
5. Maintain a high staff morale when confronted with student reading difficulties.
6. Show teachers an interest in, appreciation of, and approval of effective teaching of reading.
7. Understand the philosophy behind the district reading curriculum.
8. Involve all teachers in the school when the reading program is evaluated.
9. Allocate sufficient reading monies according to identified student needs at varying grade levels.
10. Determine the adequacy of the school's reading materials with input from the staff.
11. Insure that specific handbooks, guides, and teacher's manuals are provided for the staff.
12. Accept the school's reading program as a major responsibility.
13. Keep teachers informed about parent comments and concerns regarding reading instruction.
14. Make it clear through statements at faculty meetings that reading is a priority in the building.
15. Discuss strengths and weaknesses of the school's reading program with the staff.

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